

Vermont Arts Council Testimony February 9, 2022

Senate Institutions Committee re: Cultural Facilities Grant program updates

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Introduce myself.

Thank you for this opportunity to talk with the Committee. The Arts Council is grateful for the legislature's strong support of the Cultural Facilities program. Before I begin, I'd also like to thank to Sen. Benning for co-sponsoring our creative sector recovery bill.

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I think you all know that it the Cultural Facilities grant is one of many grant programs that the Arts Council administers as Vermont's state arts agency.

It is part of our mission to advance the arts and creativity in communities across Vermont.

WE KNOW THAT CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS ARE KEY TO THE HEALTH AND VITALITY OF VERMONT COMMUNITIES -

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National research demonstrates that across the nation, the creative sector is a catalyst for economic growth – and that it's particularly important to the economy of rural states like Vermont.

In 2 recent national studies – the Northeast Kingdom is cited as a case study of the importance of the creative economy to economic recovery and resilience.

- The NEK is one of eleven cases studied in the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies' recently published "[Creative Economies and Economic Recovery: Case Studies of Arts-Led Recovery and Resilience](#)". (pg. 59)

From our own research, we know that

Jobs in the creative sector make up 9.3% of all employment (about 40,894 jobs in 2018)

We also know that strong and vibrant arts institutions are key to attracting tourist dollars and bringing in new residents –

- Majority of Millennials (52%) and Gen-Xers (54%) say they look for communities with a vibrant arts scene when deciding where to relocate for a job.

But most of all, our theaters, libraries, town halls, community arts spaces are part of Vermont's identity, and the character of so many of our communities.

SO NOW- when Vermont is struggling with the impact of the pandemic – we know OUR CULTURAL ORGANIZATIONS ARE ESSENTIAL TO HELPING OUR COMMUNITIES TO RECOVER AND REBOUND.

[When a theater closes down for an entire season, it's not just the theater that loses revenue – an entire downtown loses revenue from the restaurants, shops and galleries and hotels where ticket-holders would have spent money.] Our communities need the arts to bounce back.

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In addition to the economic impact, by bringing people together in our cultural facilities and revitalizing these places with activities such as performances, festivals, fairs, exhibits, or classes, we foster social inclusion and community empowerment, creating an important sense of civic pride.

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We see the CULTURAL FACILITIES PROGRAM AS A CRITICAL PART OF BUILDING AND SUSTAINING OUR STATE'S CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE.

Cultural Facilities grants are administered by the Arts Council in collaboration with the Historical Society and Division of Historic Preservation – Grants go to nonprofit organizations and municipalities to expand their reach, improve safety, and ensure that the arts are accessible to all Vermonters. Grants range from 1,000 - 30,000 and require a 1:1 match.

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Grants support improvements to physical facilities to increase the usability of the space for cultural programming. such as →[SAFETY, HAZARD MITIGATION, ACCESSIBILITY]- 3 overall priorities

- upgrades to electrical wiring, and fire alarm systems
- HVAC renovations to improve air quality
- ADA compliance (accessible restrooms, elevators and walkways)
- Hazard mitigation measures (rain gutters, flood gates, sprinkler systems)
- Theatrical lighting and audio equipment

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Since 2001, THANKS TO THIS PROGRAM, we have made 326 grants totaling \$3.6 M to support theaters, museums, town halls, community arts centers and municipalities across Vermont.

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In 2014 we started collecting grantee data in final reports on the number of local Vermont vendors supported for the improvements to these facilities.

- Out of 422 businesses paid in that period, 77% were local Vermont businesses such as electricians, HVAC companies, plumbers, contractors, etc.
- Of that 77% nearly 1.6 million in grants generated 3.9 million in matching funds contributing over 5 million into the local economy. That number is just for the VT contractors and vendors alone. It also does not include the ongoing economic impact of the events and activities that happen in the spaces after these cultural assets are revitalized for community use.

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Here are just a few EXAMPLES of how the funds are typically used:

The Franklin Town Hall received a grant to support the installation of a sound system with assistive listening devices and acoustic curtains for the windows

This will have a great impact on the ability of all community members to enjoy cultural events held in the space.

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The Caledonia Grange Hall received a grant to support electrical upgrades on the ground floor.

Having the ground floor of the building electrified again has effectively doubled the functional space in the building. Last spring the Grange hosted a week of after school art workshops for kids, and regular community meals with live music on the porch, in addition to other activities.

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At the Clemmons Family Farm grant funds were used to pour a new cement floor on the lower level of the historic Big Barn. This area will be used for visual arts programs including exhibits, artist talks, art classes, artist studio space, meetings, and workshops.

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The Sheldon Historical Society received a grant to support the installation of an accessible restroom and a lift to the second-floor meeting and event space. This will more than double their capacity for events, discussions, small concerts, and displays, while enabling full participation by visitors living with decreased mobility.

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The Broad Brook Community Center lacks insulation making the space prohibitively expensive to heat in winter and stiflingly hot in summer, severely reducing its usefulness as a community center. Funding for insulation will provide Guilford with a space that can be comfortably and affordably utilized year-round by the community for cultural activities.

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Friends of the Union Meeting Hall received support for a new accessible second entrance and exit. This will provide accessibility to all members of the community and increase the capacity of the building from 49 to more than 130 per fire safety codes, allowing them to host larger and more inclusive events.

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I'm proud to say we have made grants in all 14 counties across Vermont. 70% of the funding from this program has supported cultural facilities in Vermont's most rural communities, protecting libraries, town halls and community buildings that serve our most isolated and least affluent residents.

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And the need continues to far outstrip the available funds --even with this year's funding increase, which we appreciate!

In the FY22 grant year, we received 35 requests for funds totaling \$737,867, with \$300,000 in funds available. This is the highest number of applications and grant amounts requested since we have been administering the program.

Also, In the last 5 years, we've seen a 59% increase in the number of applications submitted.

The need for VT to invest in our cultural infrastructure – demonstrated every year when we have more applications than we can support – has been made much more evident during the pandemic.

-Aging buildings continue to be in need of upgrades and repair to make them safe and accessible

-Also, these are buildings that VT has already made a considerable investment in. For decades, both state funds and private funds have supported preservation and renovation of historic downtown theaters, libraries, and community centers.

There is a compelling need to continue to make this investment to ensure that our cultural facilities survive, that our libraries, downtown theaters and community centers are there to bring us all back together again and help communities rebound economically when pandemic restrictions are lifted.

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Thank you so much for inviting me to share all the wonderful projects this funding has supported and thank you for all your support of the Cultural Facilities program and all of the Building Communities Grants.